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What's Wrong with the Christian West?

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
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Thesis Summary: Western Christian groups are losing significant numbers of adherents in the area formerly known as Christendom (Western Europe and European-dominated former colonies), a trend which seems to be quickening with time. In addition, the same Western Christian denominations are in the midst of an unprecedented period of fragmentation, with many splitting over questions of doctrine and practice. More controversially, traditionalists both within the Western churches and outside of them have claimed that the Western denominations are also experiencing a qualitative decline, asserting that the Christianity of the West has been doctrinally compromised. This thesis posits an underlying philosophical reason for this decline, one which is associated with work of the Enlightenment thinker René Descartes. Through a historical survey of Christian anthropology and analysis of human faculties, this thesis will establish the centrality of doctrines concerning human capacities in Christianity and demonstrate why a change to them would almost inevitably lead to decline.

Introduction: What's Wrong with the Christian West?

The modern world is a post-Christian world; that is, the West no longer celebrates values which have traditionally been promoted by the Christian religion nor is it overwhelmingly Christian in belief.¹ A recent survey conducted by the Pew Forum in the United States found a 5% decline in the number of responders claiming adherence to Protestant denominations in a five year span, while Roman Catholic responses fell by 1% and religiously unaffiliated responses rose by 4.3%.² In England, one of the historical bastions of Christendom, 59% of the population identified as Christian during the 2011 census, a decline of 12% from the 2001 census.³ That 59%, however, does not reflect the number of churchgoers on any given Sunday; only 1.4% of Britons are thought to be regular attenders of church services.⁴ The churches themselves are not ignorant of this change; the Roman Catholic Church recently launched a marketing campaign entitled "Catholics Come Home" in a bid to lure lapsed Catholics back into the pews.

In addition to the dramatic decline in the overall number of adherents, many Protestant groups appear to be in the midst of an unprecedented period of conflict and fragmentation. The state of Lutheranism in North America is a perfect example of the

¹ In this text, the term "West" is used to indicate the countries of Western Europe and their former colonies in which the majority of their populations traditionally identified as Christians. For example, the United States of America and Australia are counted amongst the West, but India and Singapore are not.

² "'Nones' on the Rise." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. N.p., 9 Oct. 2012. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.

³ "What Does the Census Tell Us about Religion in 2011?" Changing Religious Affiliations in England and Wales. Office for National Statistics, 16 May 2013. Web. 6 Feb. 2014.

⁴ "Empty Churches." Dear Ephesus. People of Mars Hill, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2014. <<http://dearephesusdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/empty-churches1.pdf>>.

extreme tumult facing many Western Christian churches. Tensions over the role of social justice movements in the church, the value of traditional Lutheran Confessions and orthodox Biblical interpretation have led to no fewer than thirty-six separate Lutheran Churches in the United States and Canada, many of which have appeared only in the last two decades. Other Protestant denominations in America have fared little better; former Episcopalian (now Anglican) congregations in Virginia and South Carolina have recently been locked in bitter lawsuits with The Episcopal Church concerning ownership of their churches and property.⁵ It seems unlikely that the accelerating decline in adherence and marked increase in denominational in-fighting are unconnected, but it would be a mistake to assume that one explains the other. Rather, they seem to be pointing to a deeper source of discontent, a greater underlying problem; in the words of Marcellus, they seem to suggest that “something is rotten” in the Christian West.

One might argue, quite controversially, that the underlying problem for Western Christianity is a qualitative decline, that the churches of the Christian West have lost an essential aspect of their identity. This is not merely a sentiment expressed by those outside of Western churches; traditionalist Roman Catholics, for example, worry that the Second Vatican Council’s mission to overcome “anti-Modernist neurosis”⁶ compromised

⁵ Haley, Sharron. "St. Matthias Joins Lawsuit against The Episcopal Church." *The Sumter Item*. The Clarendon Sun, 15 Jan. 2013. Web. 8 Feb. 2014.

⁶ This was apparently the succinct explanation of the council’s mission given by none other than Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI. Komonchak, Joseph A. "The Church in Crisis." *Commonweal Magazine*. 26 May 2005. Web. 8 Feb. 2014.

the integrity of the Church, effectively adulterating central doctrines and practices.⁷ The idea of a recent “fall” is not limited to traditionalist Catholics; Peter Leithart, a minister and theologian in the Presbyterian Church in America, offered the following assessment of modern Western Christianity in *First Things*: “...Christian faith no longer provides the moral compass, the sacred symbolism, or the *telos* for Western institutions. America’s Protestant establishment has collapsed. Neither evangelical Protestants nor Catholics nor a coalition of the two are poised to replace it. Christian America was real, but, whatever its great virtues and great flaws, it is gone, and the slightly frantic experiments have failed to revive the corpse. It’s past time to issue a death certificate.”⁸ Great change has occurred in Christendom over the last few decades, that much is beyond dispute; exactly *why* this change has occurred, on the other hand, is quite unclear.

A popular line of thought traces the present state of Christianity to the period of Western history sometimes called the Enlightenment⁹ and argues that the philosophical and scientific advancements of that age created an unprecedented environment of freedom. In this new world, one in which novel ideas were able to flourish, the

⁷ “Vatican II can be described as a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church... After the Second Vatican Council, she described herself as ‘dynamic,’ ‘progressive,’ a ‘new Church,’ and a ‘Church of our times.’ She claimed to be adapting herself and Christ’s message to the conditions of the modern world. But she sent out a mixed message. In the face of the drastic modernizations introduced, she also claimed that “nothing essential was changed” and that “she was only returning to primitive practice.” While many accepted these assertions without thought, others found them self-contradictory. The net result was a confusion of loyalties which the subsequent forty-five years have done little to alleviate.”

-Rama Coomaraswamy

"The Problem: Is It The Same Church?" World Wisdom. World Wisdom, n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2014. <http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/viewpdf/default.aspx?article-title=The_Problem--Is_It_The_Same_Church_by_Rama_Coomaraswamy.pdf>.

⁸ Leithart, Peter J., "Micro-Christendoms." *First Things*. First Things, 11 Apr. 2014. Web. 11 Apr. 2014.

⁹ The validity of this title is highly questionable, as is the use of the phrase “Dark Ages” to refer to the time between the fall of Rome and the equally contentious Italian “Renaissance”.

intellectual elite found that life outside of the church was simply more attractive than the prospect of arguing in the forums within it. Over time, the general population followed; after centuries of power, people were tired of being under the church's control. The end result of this process, such an argument claims, is modernity, an age without a dominant faith.

This hypothesis appears to be incomplete, and in parts, grossly inaccurate. It fails to provide an answer to some of the main features of the modern religious landscape; most notably, the frequency of church schism. In the opinion of the author, it also attributes a greater novelty to the Enlightenment than historically justifiable. The Enlightenment was indeed a time of great philosophical diversity, but this atmosphere was far from unique; the Middle Ages, as any reader of medieval philosophy knows, was far from being a time of intellectual unity.

Though it may be inaccurate, it would be wrong to conclude that the "Enlightenment thesis" is devoid of value; on a very basic level, it is simply too general. Rather than issuing the overarching claim that "novel ideas" led to a societal shift away from religious adherence, is it possible to pinpoint a central idea or concept that sparked the decline? Is it possible to trace that idea to a particular person or group? Finally, is it even feasible to suggest that a single idea could change the world so dramatically?

This thesis will attempt to answer those very questions. I hope to show that a change in attitudes concerning the faculties of the human person, and the response of many Western churches to that change, seems to have a direct connection to the decline of Christianity in the modern West. Although the Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes is best known for advocating an ontological dualism, I believe that his

estimation of the faculties of the human person had a far more profound effect on the subsequent history of Western Christianity. By exploring the way in which human composition has been understood throughout Christian history, I will attempt to demonstrate a connection between philosophical anthropology, theological doctrines and the current decline in numbers of adherents. It is this connection that I believe offers a compelling explanation for why persons who have never read Descartes or engaged in a philosophical examination of human faculties would nonetheless share his views and, perhaps, reject organized religious practice because of them.

Section I: The Role of Personhood in Christianity

Before beginning an examination of the historical trajectory of anthropology in Christianity, it is necessary to make explicit the central role played by the concept of personhood in the Christian religion. The proof of this centrality is quite easy to provide: the very tenets that distinguish Christian religions from non-Christian religions (the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation) are essentially beliefs about the personhood of God.

The first quintessentially Christian doctrine is the doctrine of the Trinity, of God as three distinct persons. Though this formulation is hinted at in the New Testament (Matthew 3:16-17 & 28:19 can be taken as reliable signposts; 1 John 5:7 should not be considered reliable), it is not made explicit in any of the Scriptures.¹⁰ It is only with the Nicene Creed, written at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, that God is explicitly identified as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹

It should be made clear that although Christians affirm that God is three persons of one essence, describing exactly what a Divine person *is* is extremely difficult. The classic definition of a person provided by Boethius, “an *individual* substance of a rational nature”¹², seems to be incompatible with the notion of the Trinity being of “one essence”.¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas adopted Boethius’s definition of person and modified it

¹⁰ There are indications, however, that a lack of belief in the Trinity was considered heretical in the early church, as suggested by the excommunication of Sabellius (c. 220).

¹¹ "Symbolum Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum - Greek." The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Creeds of Christendom, n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.creeds.net/ancient/niceneg.htm>>.

¹² Boethius’s definition need not be interpreted as excluding the prospect of supra-rational knowledge.

¹³ Aquinas, Thomas. "Question 29. The Divine Persons." SUMMA THEOLOGICA: The Divine Persons (Prima Pars, Q. 29). New Advent, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

in order to describe a Divine hypostasis, calling the persons of the Holy Trinity “...relation[s] subsisting in the Divine [i.e. uncreated] nature.”¹⁴ The general consensus amongst Christian churches, however, is that the exact nature of Divine personhood, even the Trinity itself, is mysterious; St. Jerome wrote, “The true profession of the mystery of the Trinity is to own that we do not comprehend it.”¹⁵

The doctrine of the Incarnation, the second central belief of the Christian religion, identifies Jesus Christ as both fully God and fully man. Though it seems that Jesus makes explicit claims to divinity in the New Testament,¹⁶ fierce debate occurred amongst Christian bodies concerning Christology for the first three centuries of the religion. The first four Ecumenical councils, called to end this infighting, were essentially concerned with personhood: the relationship between human and Divine personhood (Nicaea), the possession of a human mind by the Divine (Constantinople), the possibility of union between God and man (Ephesus), and the interaction of wills in Christ (Chalcedon).¹⁷

Personhood can thus be confidently said to lie at the heart of the Christian religion; central doctrines concerning the nature of God in Christianity would be unintelligible without reference to the concept of personhood. Man, made in the “image and likeness” of God, bears enough resemblance to his Creator to engage in some sort

¹⁴ Aquinas, Thomas. "Question 40. The persons as compared to the relations or properties." *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*. New Advent. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

¹⁵ Schaff, Philip. "NPNF2-06. Jerome: The Principal Works of St. Jerome." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

¹⁶ John 8:58 is often provided as a key proof for Christ's claims to divinity.

¹⁷ "The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church." The Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross - Studies in the Faith. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

of relationship with Him.¹⁸ This is the central implication of Divine personhood: as persons are beings that can be known in a way distinct from the knowledge of a fact, God (being three persons) can also be known in a way that is above the level of fact. But what sort of “knowledge” can one have of God? Which faculty does man employ to know God? What would a Church that ceased to emphasize this sort of knowing look like? In order to answer these questions, questions which will begin to depict the nature of changes in the Christian West, a more in-depth look at Christian history, and some pre-Christian history, is necessary.

¹⁸ This phrase is a combination of statements made in Genesis 1:26 & 1:27

Section Two: In the Beginning

Discussions about the human person in early Christianity did not occur in a philosophical vacuum; attempts to uncover man's nature and abilities began centuries before the birth of Christ. The history of philosophical anthropology in the West stretches back to the Pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, often called "the father of Greek philosophy". While claiming that the fundamental substance of the universe was water, Aristotle recounts in *De Anima* that "...Thales also thought that all things are full of gods."¹⁹ The resulting perspective on human composition need not be interpreted as dualistic; perhaps Thales thought of "water" much more expansively than the modern person. Pythagoras is one of the first philosophers known to have spoken directly about the concept of a soul, by which he seems to have meant a persisting substance that is an individual consciousness. Xenophanes, another Pre-Socratic, wrote of Pythagoras: "Once, they say, he was passing by when a puppy was being whipped, and he took pity and said: 'Stop, do not beat it; it is the soul of a friend that I recognized when I heard its voice.'"²⁰ It is thus clear that by the time of Socrates (the fifth century before Christ), some Greeks had constructed a picture of the soul that included a persisting sense of "self" during life, a continuation of that identity after death and the possibility of metempsychosis.

Plato greatly expanded on the concept of soul (ψυχή) in the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. Line 435C of the *Republic* indicates that Plato conceived of

¹⁹ "Thales." The First Philosophers of Greece. Ed. Arthur Fairbanks. Hanover Historical Texts Project, June 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

²⁰ Lorenz, Hendrik. "Ancient Theories of Soul." Stanford University. Stanford University, 23 Oct. 2003. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

the soul as a plurality, as consisting of multiple parts. He aligns the three parts of the soul with peoples in the ancient world: the “high spirit” corresponds to Thracians, Scythians and the love of wisdom or reason to the Athenians and the love of pleasure to Phoenicians and Egyptians.²¹ The just person, Plato claims, is the one who maintains a balance within himself, with reason guiding the spirit and appetite. The exact capacities attributed to reason are somewhat unclear. Reason²² is, of course, the faculty which discerns goodness and directs the other parts of the soul, but whether or not Plato’s *Logistikon* is confined to rational judgements in the *Republic* remains up for debate.

The *Phaedrus*, however, seems to claim explicitly that the soul is capable of perceiving Reality *as it is*, albeit only once it is removed from the body. Plato writes of the winged soul seeing a, “...region above the heaven [which] was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be... For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul.”²³

In both the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*, Plato identifies the soul as an immortal entity and the body as a sort of prison. Socrates, speaking to Simmias in his last moments, indicates that the soul actually *benefits* from death by asking, “And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body, as I was saying before; the habit of the soul gathering and collecting herself into herself, out of all the courses of the

²¹ Plato, and Benjamin Jowett. "The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato." The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.

²² Reason henceforth will be used to refer to the process by which one moves from premise to conclusion.

²³ Plato, and Benjamin Jowett. "The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato." The Internet Classics Archive | Phaedrus by Plato. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.

body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life, so also in this, as far as she can; the release of the soul from the chains of the body?"²⁴

Much more could (and has) been written about Plato's ideas concerning human composition, particularly the division and actions of the soul, but for the purposes of this thesis it is important only to note further the impact his ideas had on early Christianity. Though certain books in the New Testament suggest that the leaders of the early Church held a rather lukewarm view of philosophers (Acts 17, in which St. Paul speaks on "The Unknown God", includes the following jibe: "For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing."²⁵), many within it were more than willing to praise the merits of Greek philosophy.

St. Justin the Martyr (d. 165) saw significant similarities between Christian doctrine and the philosophy of Socrates, leading him to make the following statement: "We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; *and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them...*"²⁶ In *The First Apology*, the work from which that excerpt was drawn, St. Justin also affirms the teachings of Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato on the persistence of the soul after death. St. Justin was not an isolated example in the early Church; St. Clement of Alexandria and St. Augustine,

²⁴ Plato, and Benjamin Jowett. "The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato." The Internet Classics Archive | Phaedo by Plato. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2014.

²⁵ Acts of the Apostles 17:21

²⁶ "The First Apology." CHURCH FATHERS: (St. Justin Martyr). New Advent, n.d. Web. 5 Mar. 2014.

amongst others, are also recorded as accepting the veracity of Platonic thought on some aspects of the soul.²⁷

²⁷ For instance, its persistence after biological death.

Section Three: Philosophical Anthropology in the Bible

St. Justin did not pass judgement on the Greek philosophers arbitrarily, but considered their work in relation to the collected teachings of the Christian religion. The primary source for St. Justin's anthropology was, of course, the Bible. Far from being unambiguous sources, the Old and New Testaments provide a meandering account of human nature and composition, one which forces a reader to connect a number of disparate statements in order to arrive at a coherent picture.

The first reference to man's composition in the Christian Scriptures occurs in the second chapter of the *Book of Genesis*, where it is written that "...the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."²⁸ This statement is deceptively complex; it is not at all clear if the breath of God instills another nature within the human or if it is simply the property of motion (more akin to Aristotle's conception of the soul). Even more basically, the distinction between the nature of "the dust of the ground", the source of man, and "the Lord God" is not drawn out in a satisfactory manner, leaving the reader to make an assumption concerning their distinction.

A later passage in Genesis again refers to the nature of man without providing any real clarification. Genesis 3:19, set in the midst of Adam and Eve's dismissal from the garden, reads, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."²⁹

²⁸ Genesis 2:7

²⁹ Genesis 3:19

Like the previous passage, this excerpt also suffers from a lack of particularity; is the breath of God mentioned in Genesis 2:7 not to be understood as “a part” of humans? Does the author hold in mind any distinction of levels in human composition (body and soul, soul and spirit, etc.)? The language of the passage is purely terrestrial, so is the reader to understand that humans are simply collections of dust?

If the previous passages seem to suggest a stark division between the nature of God and human nature, what is to be made of the claim made in Psalm 82, “...Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High”?³⁰ This statement, paired with another Genesis verse (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him...”³¹), raises man far beyond mere dust; by virtue of being made in the Image of God, he is himself a god.

The title does *sound* nice, but what, exactly, is a god? The punctuation of the verse indicates a qualitative difference between a god and God. One can quite easily come up with a list of distinctions: “gods” are created, limited in knowledge and less than omnipotent, whereas God is none of those things. While not elevating humans to the very top of the chain of being, the title does seem to provide *some* sort of dignity or power intrinsic to humans that the earlier passages did not emphasize. With the preceding passages in mind, it seems that picture of humanity that the reader is provided places the human person a bit above mud and a bit beneath God. If “gods” are different than God, as it seems reasonable to conclude, what sort of family resemblance exists between humans and their Maker?

³⁰ Psalm 82:6

³¹ Genesis 1:27

Perhaps the clearest answer is to be found in the instructions of Christ: “Be ye therefore perfect, *even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*”³² Perfection is a unique quality of God; to be perfect simply means to be God, or, at very least, to be *completely with* God. As the first “way” of being perfect is generally regarded as unattainable,³³ given man’s not being God, but gods, it must be concluded that man has the ability to be completely with God.³⁴

In sending his disciples out in the tenth chapter of the *Gospel of Matthew*, Christ may provide a clue to the faculty man employs to be with God. Whilst shoring up the resolve of the Apostles, Christ says, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell.”³⁵ Aside from being a great incentive to not fail in their appointed task, this statement to the Apostles is notable as one of the first clear indications that humans are composite beings. It is important, however, not to read too much of one’s own prejudices into this verse, as the precise functions of the soul and body are not made clear by Christ. He only says that the soul can be destroyed in Hell, leaving many

³² The Gospel of Matthew 5:48

³³ Even the Palamite concept of theosis seems to leave some distinction between the being uncreated from all eternity (Christ) and beings who become uncreated.

³⁴ To those who say that Christ is commanding in jest, C. S. Lewis has an emphatic reply: “The command ‘Be ye perfect’ is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were “gods” and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness.”

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1958. 173-74. Print.

³⁵ The Gospel of Matthew 10:28

questions about it unanswered. What exactly the soul and body *do*, and how the faculties are divided between them, remains mysterious.

After an overview of the Old Testament and the Gospels, it is only clear that man is an amalgam, both dust and god, body and soul, capable of acting and perceiving God. St. Paul, writing in the *Epistle to the Romans*, was perhaps the first within the Christian tradition to attempt a further clarification of man's substance and faculties. In the seventh chapter of that book, he writes, "...with the mind (νοῦ) I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh (σάρκι) the law of sin."³⁶ A person has (at least) a mind and flesh that seem to be distinct, as Christ indicated in the *Gospel of Matthew*, but a clear statement concerning the activities of these components is, again, absent.

Is rationality a property of the mind or the flesh on St. Paul's account? If the act of voluntary service requires some sort of rationality, and St. Paul is voluntarily serving God with the mind and sin with the flesh, then it would appear that both the mind and the flesh can be said to participate in rationality.

In the light of St. Paul's comments in the *Epistle to the Romans*, what is one to make of his account in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth; such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth; How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter"³⁷ The faculty employed in this experience does not seem to be either the sort

³⁶ The Epistle to the Romans 7:25

³⁷ The Second Epistle to the Corinthians 12:2-4

of mind or flesh that is laid out in Romans. Could it be that St. Paul (generally interpreted to be the man in the account) did not mean to limit a Christian anthropology to a simple mind/flesh dichotomy?

Many questions concerning the composition of the person remain unanswered after a reading of the Bible, even after God Himself has spoken on the topic! Neither Christ nor St. Paul, however, were particularly interested in constructing a systematic theology of the Christian religion. It was with the first attempts at crafting such a system, undertaken by men like Origen of Alexandria, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine, that more concrete answers on the question of human faculties began to emerge.³⁸

³⁸ After the writing of this thesis, it emerged that an explicit reference to human composition being three-fold is included in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. This fact, however, does not clarify the picture of human faculties that the Bible intends to convey, but, to the contrary, merely muddies the water even further.

Section Four: The First Systematic Theologians

If Origen of Alexandria (184-254) was not the first systematic theologian of the Christian religion, he was very nearly so. Born in Alexandria to Christian parents and educated in the Hellenic tradition, Origen sought to work the many philosophical statements within the Scriptures into a cohesive system of thought. *On First Principles*, his groundwork of the Christian religion, covers the entirety of created history (including things which are yet to come!). Stretching from the foundations of the world and reasons for the fall to the possibility of universal reconciliation, the work is remarkable in both its breadth and depth. Most importantly for this thesis, however, is the detailed investigation of human personhood and capacities that Origen undertakes across the books in *On First Principles*.

Origen is famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view) for claiming that the soul of a person necessarily precedes the body. Though the veracity of this conception can be debated, the making of such a bold claim forced Origen to delineate the properties and capacities of a person. Rather than continue to propagate an image of persons as bodies and souls, however, he partitioned man into a tripartite being: a body, a soul and a mind.

In order to provide a contrast for the composition of man, Origen first identifies the properties of God. In Book I of *On First Principles*, he writes, "God therefore must not be thought to be any kind of body, nor to exist in a body, but to be a simple intellectual existence, be believed to have in himself a more or less, but is Unity, or if I may so say, Oneness throughout, and the mind and fount from which originates all

intellectual existence or mind. Now mind does not need physical space in which to move and operate, nor does it need a magnitude discernible by the senses, nor bodily shape or color, nor anything else whatever like these, which are suitable to bodies and matter.”³⁹ The “mind” of which Origen writes seems to be a different faculty entirely from the “mind” referenced in the *Epistle to the Romans* insofar as it appears to be supra-rational, above the rationality.⁴⁰ In fact, the mind of St. Paul bares much more resemblance to Origen’s idea of soul, “...an existence possessing imagination and desire... capable of feeling and movement.”⁴¹ It is important to note that the soul in Origen’s thought does not seem permanent; in Book II of *On First Principles*, he writes, “...when the mind departed from its original condition and dignity it became or was termed a soul, and if ever it is restored and corrected it returns to the condition of being a mind.”⁴²

The average person on Origen’s account can thus to be taken as a body and soul, with the potential for *cultivating* mind. The soul, via its possession of imagination, desire, feeling and movement, is conceived of as the rational portion of the person, while the body seems to be the physical vessel which is directed by the soul. The most succinct expression of Origen’s anthropology comes in the sixth chapter of Book II, in a description of Heaven. In Heaven “...the rational being, growing at each successive stage, not as it grew when in this life in the flesh or body and in the soul, but increasing

³⁹ Origen, George W. Butterworth, and Henri De. Lubac. *On First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text*. Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1973. PDF.

⁴⁰ Again, if one also includes St. Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, perhaps he simply used the term “mind” to mean different things in different contexts.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

in mind and intelligence, advances as a mind already perfect to perfect knowledge, no longer hindered by its former carnal senses, but developing in intellectual power, ever approaching the pure and gazing ‘face to face’, if I may so speak, on the causes of things.⁴³ The end to which man must strive, then, is this “face to face” encounter with God, an act which is not accomplished by the body or soul, but by the mind.

Though Origen and some teachings associated with him subsequently fell under a cloud of suspicion from Church authorities, his thoughts on the faculties of the human person greatly influenced a number of figures within the early church, especially a group referred to as the Cappadocian Fathers. Amongst the Cappadocians, St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), in particular, devoted a substantial amount of energy to philosophical anthropology. His famous *On The Making of Man* is entirely dedicated to explicating the place of humans in the world, from the particular features of bodies to the growth of souls. St. Gregory was in accordance with Origen on the ability of man to “see” God; he wrote that humans were able to perceive God with the faculty of mind, or as he alternately refers to it, the “spirit”.

In the eighth section of *On The Making of Man*, St. Gregory writes, “...as we are taught the like thing by the apostle in what he says to the Ephesians, praying for them that the complete grace of their ‘body and soul and spirit’ may be preserved at the coming of the Lord; using, the word ‘body’ for the nutritive part, and denoting the sensitive by the word ‘soul,’ and the intellectual by ‘spirit.’ Likewise too the Lord instructs the scribe in the Gospel that he should set before every commandment that love to God which is exercised with all the heart and soul and mind: for here also it seems to me that

⁴³ Ibid.

the phrase indicates the same difference, naming the more corporeal existence ‘heart,’ the intermediate ‘soul,’ and the higher nature, the intellectual and mental faculty, ‘mind.’”⁴⁴ It could be argued that his division between “soul” and “mind” is a distinction between higher and lower mental functions; that is, forms of rationality. Statements made by St. Gregory in his *Life of Moses*, however, suggest otherwise. In the chapter on the Burning Bush, St. Gregory writes, “ In my view the definition of truth is this: *not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being*. Falsehood is a kind of impression which arises in the understanding about nonbeing: as though what does not exist does, in fact, exist. But truth is the sure apprehension of real Being. So, *whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of time will barely apprehend what true Being is*, that is, what possesses existence in its own nature, and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self-subsisting nature.”⁴⁵

This is a truly momentous statement: St. Gregory has, in essence, declared knowledge of true Being to be essentially impossible to attain with one’s rational faculties.⁴⁶ “Not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being”, therefore, cannot be taken merely to mean having a proper collection of facts or rational premises. It seems to indicate that Christ’s references to “knowing the truth” (“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁴⁷) are, in fact, directed not towards the activities of the

⁴⁴ "On the Making of Man." CHURCH FATHERS: (St. Gregory of Nyssa). New Advent, n.d. Web. 16 Mar. 2014.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa. "The Life of Moses." The Life of Moses. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014. <<http://academic.mu.edu/phil/jonesj/courses/P222/p22220062NyssaMoses.pdf>>.

⁴⁶ Though, perhaps, the philosopher will have some vague ideas about true Being that do, in fact, line up with Reality.

⁴⁷ The Gospel of John 8:32

rational mind, but instead exhort the “knowing” of the spirit, the faculty which knows God non-discursively.

Though comments such as these are perfectly normal (that is, orthodox) by the standards of Eastern Christianity, both ancient and modern, Western Christians might find themselves wary of such claims. Is it necessary, or even acceptable, to talk about a faculty capable of perceiving God? If such an anthropology was the standard for the early Church, why would it not have been discussed by the Western Fathers? As it turns out, even the man considered by many to be the father of mind-body dualism, St. Augustine of Hippo, held some notion of a supra-rational faculty in human persons, one which is able to perceive God directly.

The tenth book of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is often held up as a paradigmatic example of anthropological dualism; indeed, with epistemological comments like “I the inner knew them; I, the mind, through the senses of my body”,⁴⁸ it seems that the Bishop of Hippo limits the concept of knowledge to processed sensory experiences. The discussion of the role and extent of memory in Book X seems to confirm this sentiment, leaving many modern scholars to assume St. Augustine was a sort of proto-Cartesian. Such an assessment, however, ignores perhaps the most important conclusion of that particular section of the *Confessions*: that knowledge of God is found neither through the senses nor the memory.⁴⁹ Concluding memory to be insufficient for the knowledge of God, St. Augustine writes, “Where then did I find Thee, that I might learn Thee? For in my memory Thou wert not, before I learned Thee. Where then did I find Thee, that I

⁴⁸ Augustine of Hippo. "Confessions of Saint Augustine." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.

⁴⁹ “The senses” refer to the empirical faculties (sight, taste, touch, hearing, taste) and “memory” refers to the ability to recollect instances of sensory input.

might learn Thee, but in Thee above me? Place there is none.”⁵⁰ If St. Augustine, after devoting so much time to explicating the domain of the senses and memory, concludes that God is not to be known by either, is he in effect declaring God to be unknowable?

The answer to that question is an emphatic “no”. Book VII of the *Confessions* seems to dispel both the notion that St. Augustine was purely a mind-body dualist and the idea that he believed God to be beyond all knowledge. In Chapter 17 of Book VII, St. Augustine writes in almost Origenian terms of the “upward trajectory” involved in the experience of God.⁵¹ In arriving at knowledge of “that which is”, St. Augustine finds himself moving from the use of body to soul to “intelligence”. Intelligence can be surmised to be a faculty distinct from the reason or memory based on St. Augustine’s account of coming to know the Truth; in saying that it occurred in a “flash of a trembling glance”, that is, instantaneously, it seems fair to conclude that the faculty is non-discursive. The description of the faculty and its object is brief, but not surprisingly so; nothing can be phrased rationally concerning the supra-rational. Perhaps the most surprising observation one can make concerning St. Augustine’s anthropology in the light of Book VII is how very much like Origen’s it can appear. By demonstrating the way

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “For, inquiring whence it was that I admired the beauty of bodies whether celestial or terrestrial, and what supported me in judging correctly on things mutable, and pronouncing, “This should be thus, this not,”—inquiring, then, whence I so judged, seeing I did so judge, I had found the unchangeable and true eternity of Truth, above my changeable mind. And thus, by degrees, I passed from bodies to the soul, which makes use of the senses of the body to perceive; and thence to its inward faculty, to which the bodily senses represent outward things, and up to which reach the capabilities of beasts; and thence, again, I passed on to the reasoning faculty, unto which whatever is received from the senses of the body is referred to be judged, which also, finding itself to be variable in me, raised itself up to its own intelligence, and from habit drew away my thoughts, withdrawing itself from the crowds of contradictory phantasms; that so it might find out that light by which it was besprinkled, when, without all doubting, it cried out, “that the unchangeable was to be preferred before the changeable;” whence also it knew that unchangeable, which, unless it had in some way known, it could have had no sure ground for preferring it to the changeable. And thus, with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at that which is.”
Ibid.

in which the tasks of the body and soul are self-evident in every rational being, but the faculty of “mind” or “intelligence” must actively be pursued in order to be known, St. Augustine seems to hold an anthropology similar to the one developed by Origen two centuries prior.⁵² It is worth emphasizing that St. Augustine did see the intelligence as a faculty which could be refined systematically, i.e. the experience of God could be cultivated in human persons.

Having briefly analyzed St. Augustine’s anthropology, a pattern has become clear in the early Church’s thoughts on the composition of man. The first systematic theologians of the Christian religion, despite disagreeing with one another on points of doctrine and practice, seem to be univocal in asserting that man possesses the ability to perceive God (which will henceforth be referred to as “nous” or “intellectus”⁵³). As demonstrated by its presence in the works of both St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine, it is reasonable to claim this doctrine to be neither “eastern” nor “western”, but a basic component of Christianity proper.

⁵² St. Augustine did, of course, differ from Origen in denying the possibility of metempsychosis or transmigration, but this does not detract from the beliefs they shared.

⁵³ It should be made clear that the use of the term “intellectus” in this paper refers to a very specific faculty, one which allows for the non-discursive knowledge of God. The term intellectus has been used for thousands of years to refer to a wide variety of things; Roger Bacon, for example, wrote frequently of the “active intellect” but meant something quite distinct from a non-discursive faculty. Even those who do seem to accept this faculty, including Meister Eckhart, continue to make use of the term “intellectus” to refer to certain rational capacities or activities.

Section Five: The Medievals

Between the death of St. Augustine in 430 and the end of the first millennium, the idea of a Christian anthropology remained relatively unexplored in Western Europe. Figures like Boethius (who, as it was mentioned earlier, claimed persons to be an individual substance of a rational nature) intermittently grappled with the division of faculties in the Latin-speaking lands, but, on the whole, discussions of anthropology remained in the domain of Eastern Christian thought. Writers in the Christian East like St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) and St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) continued to investigate the particular faculties of the human person, with St. Symeon, in particular, advocating the supra-rational experience of God as a necessity for one's spiritual life. St. Symeon affirmed the noetic faculties present in human persons, writing, "He... who is united to God by *faith* and recognizes him by *action* is indeed enabled to see Him by *contemplation*... His mind itself is light and sees all things as light, and the light has life and imparts light to him who sees it."⁵⁴ Within St. Symeon's writings are the same features concerning the experience of God that are present in Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine: the language of trajectory ("Let us flee from the deceit of life and its supposed happiness... Let us endeavor to see Him and contemplate Him even in this life."⁵⁵), the affirmation of a special capacity within man capable of experiencing God directly and the idea that such an experience can be cultivated rather than occurring randomly.

⁵⁴ Symeon The New Theologian. "Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses." Google Books. Google, n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Though the early Medieval West produced little in the way of explicit treatises on inner knowledge or human composition, the omnipresent metaphor of the journey served to communicate many of the same themes. The Irish monastics, in particular, practiced physical exile (and intentional exploration, in the case of St. Brendan the Navigator) in order to achieve an interior silence. Perhaps the greatest of the Medieval Irish writers, John Scotus Eriugena, differed substantially from the average Western thinker at the time insofar as he specifically addressed man's faculties and nature.

In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena boldly claims that "...just as the Divine Essence is infinite, so human substance made in Its image is bounded by no definite limit."⁵⁶ Though this claim can be viewed as a grandiose expression of human capabilities, it is merely a reassertion of the claim from Genesis 1:26-27, of man's being in the "image and likeness" of God. The path to knowledge of God is, for Eriugena, a process that begins with the search for self-knowledge. "And this is the greatest and perhaps the only step towards knowledge of the truth," he wrote, "namely, that human nature should first know and love itself and then refer the whole of its knowledge of itself and the whole of its love of itself to the glory and love and knowledge of the Creator."⁵⁷ It would be a mistake to understand Eriugena to be claiming that complete self-knowledge can be had outside of the knowledge of God; rather, it seems that his intent is to make explicit the real intimacy possible between "gods" and God.

Eriugena was, however, one of the last Westerners to express such ideas in such bold terms. Around the beginning of the second millennium, the educational centers of

⁵⁶ Moran, Dermot. "Nature, Man and God in the Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena." University College Dublin. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2014. <https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Moran_Scotus%20Eriugena%20on%20Nature,%20Man,%20&%20God.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Western Christendom began to recover the works of Aristotle accompanied by the interpretations of Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes. With Aristotelianism came a greater emphasis on argument being grounded in empirical claims; philosophers like Peter Abelard used this platform to assert empirically grounded rationality as the supreme way of knowing in human beings, capable of explaining all aspects of human nature and experience. While few philosophers in the Middle Ages were as radical as Abelard in their enthusiasm for the capacity of rationality, the support for Aristotelianism forced all subsequent thinkers in the Western tradition to temper their assertions regarding human faculties with a cursory nod to Aristotelian psychology.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) perhaps allows the modern reader the best look into the changing nature of Western philosophy. The student of the equally impressive Albertus Magnus, Aquinas attempted a complete exposition of the Christian religion in his *Summa Theologica*, which, by necessity, included a sizable inquiry into human nature and capacities. Question 79 of the *Summa* deals with the place of the intellect in the human person; Aquinas concludes that rather than existing as the essence of the soul or a separate faculty altogether, the intellect should be considered merely as a power of the soul.⁵⁸ In this regard, Aquinas represents a departure from the

⁵⁸ "...it is necessary to say that the intellect is a power of the soul, and not the very essence of the soul. For then alone the essence of that which operates is the immediate principle of operation, when operation itself is its being: for as power is to operation as its act, so is the essence to being. But in God alone His action of understanding is His very Being. Wherefore in God alone is His intellect His essence: while in other intellectual creatures, the intellect is power."

Aquinas, Thomas. "Question 79." *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*. New Advent, n.d. Web. 1 April. 2014.

earlier voices within the tradition by depending on a rational argument to establish an anthropology.⁵⁹⁶⁰

Something here must be said of all rationalist criticisms of the doctrine of the nous or intellect; that is, all are equally guilty of category error. It seems fair to assert that the faculties of human persons are hierarchically ordered. The emotions, by virtue of being sub-rational, are able to be comprehended and ordered by the rationality; Hume's proposal to let the emotions control the rationality is so radical precisely because it inverts the traditional hierarchy. The intellectus, said by Origen and the early systematic theologians to be a supra-rational faculty, is thus clearly above the full comprehension of the rationality. To claim that belief in the existence of the nous or intellectus is dependent upon the rationality being able to comprehend it is even more egregious than demanding one's sense of touch "prove" the existence of rationality. A supra-rational faculty must be experienced in order to be "proven"; how could one validate any other faculty save by its use?

This mistake, the mistake of the Medievals, in time became the error of the Enlightenment, though it should be noted that persons roughly contemporaneous with Aquinas in both the East and the West continued to advocate for the concept of the

⁵⁹ The views expressed through the *Summa*, however, should not necessarily be understood as the terminal beliefs of Aquinas. A popular anecdote to Aquinas' later life explains the reason: "On the feast of St. Nicholas [in 1273, Aquinas] was celebrating Mass when he received a revelation that so affected him that he wrote and dictated no more, leaving his great work the *Summa Theologiae* unfinished. To Brother Reginald's (his secretary and friend) expostulations he replied, 'The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.' When later asked by Reginald to return to writing, Aquinas said, 'I can write no more. I have seen things that make my writings like straw.'"

Frye, Peggy. "Quick Questions." When St. Thomas Aquinas Likened His Work to Straw, Was That a Retraction of What He Wrote? Catholic Answers, n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2014.

⁶⁰ His faith in the accuracy of Aristotle on almost all matters (evidenced by his frequent nods to "The Philosopher") is considered by the author a regress in Western thought.

intellectus. Foremost amongst those in the West was the German mystic Eckhart von Hochheim, generally referred to as Meister Eckhart (1260-1327). Eckhart belonged to the generation of Dominicans immediately following St. Thomas Aquinas, yet where Aquinas was disinclined to speak of the intellectus in great detail, Eckhart wrote extensively on the ability of man to know God.

Though some modern writers⁶¹ have suggested that the intellectus in Eckhart is not a distinct faculty, it seems difficult to reconcile the rationality with the powers of the intellectus. As Eckhart himself wrote, "There is something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable. If the whole soul were of such a nature, it would be uncreated and uncreatable. And this is the intellect."⁶² If the intellectus is understood as being a part of the soul in Eckhart's anthropology, it must be concluded that its mode of "being a part" is extraordinarily different from the normal associations between person and capacity (i.e. One might say "my sense of sight" or "my point of view" in reference to a subjective capacity, but it would seem incorrect to refer to the action of the intellectus as being the property of a particular person).

Shortly after the death of Eckhart in the West, a dispute concerning the human ability to know God arose in the Christian East. The Hesychast Controversy of the fourteenth century pitted the contemplative practices of the monks on Mount Athos against the philosophical perspectives of a Western-influenced monk, one Barlaam of Calabria (Sicily). The Athonite monks, "led" by Gregory Palamas, the Bishop of Thessaloniki, contended that the practice of hesychasm (from the word ἡσυχία,

⁶¹ Sotillos, Samuel. "Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge." Sacred Web. Sacred Web, n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2014. <http://www.sacredweb.com/online_articles/sw31_sotillos_review.pdf>.

⁶² Maurer, Armand. "Medieval Philosophy." Google Books. Google, n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2014.

meaning “stillness” or “silence”) allowed one to interact with the uncreated energies of God. Barlaam denied this claim, saying that human were capable only of perceiving created energies. A series of synods held from 1341 to 1353, sometimes referred to as the Ninth Ecumenical Council, affirmed the uncreated energies of God to be within the scope of the nous’ perception; the essence of God, however, was agreed by both parties to be forever outside of the realm of human knowledge.⁶³

The Bishop of Thessaloniki was celebrated for his triumph, becoming St. Gregory Palamas soon after dying, while Barlaam returned to Sicily and became a Bishop in his own right. The church that elevated the Sicilian monk to the episcopate was not, however, centered in Constantinople; Barlaam was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1342.⁶⁴ This event, perhaps more than any other, has created a dichotomy in the mind of the Christian East related to the practice of contemplation: the East affirms contemplative prayer to be a way to know God, while the West, by virtue of appointing Barlaam to a position of power, appears to deny the claim.⁶⁵ The year of Barlaam’s investiture as Bishop of Gerace, 1342, thus serves as a decisive point of departure for the understanding of human capacities in the Christian East and West.⁶⁶

⁶³ The division between the uncreated essence of God and uncreated energies, though accepted by both parties in the Hesychast Controversy, is the topic of some skepticism in both ancient and modern sources.

⁶⁴ "Barlaam of Calabria." - OrthodoxWiki. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2014.

⁶⁵ This perspective is, of course, a biased one; one can be a Bishop for many reasons outside of philosophical ideology. The spiritual/rational dichotomy between East and West has stuck and is, however skewed it may be, held by a large number of Orthodox Christians with whom the author has come into contact.

⁶⁶ One might question why, if the East & West seem to have held different anthropologies by 1342, Barlaam of Calabria is not deemed the “chief antagonist” of this thesis. To briefly answer such an objection, it should be noted that Barlaam, while denying the possibility of experiencing God directly, did not also deny that *things in general could be known*. It is Descartes’ solipsistic emphasis that separates him from Barlaam and ultimately proved more influential to modern Western thought.

Section Six: The Invention of the Modern Man

Before proceeding to a criticism of René Descartes, it would be helpful to summarize the preceding sections in order to make explicit the extent to which his philosophy (and, by a process of intellectual osmosis, the philosophy of the average Westerner in the present day) radically reduces the capacities of human persons. It has been shown that Western thinkers since pre-Christian times conceived of human persons as beings capable of attaining a certain flourishing across several realms, including the intellectual or spiritual realm. Since the time of Plato, and perhaps even earlier, it had been affirmed that a specific capacity for experiencing God non-discursively was necessary to achieve this spiritual flourishing. Up until the late Middle Ages, these ideas seem to have been recognized as relatively orthodox amongst thinkers in the Christian West.

The counter-intuitively named “Renaissance”, which began in Italy during the fourteenth century, included paradigm shifts in the study of philosophy. The changes in philosophical assumptions that developed during that period can be traced, with some certainty, to the source of most Renaissance “innovations”: money. The rise of large scale trade in the Mediterranean during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries gradually upset the prevailing balance of civil power across the continent, with the newly influential trading classes exercising their economic muscle through patronage. While this process has been the focus of myriad studies, many of them interesting in their own right, the main source of interest for this thesis is the effect such a financial windfall had on the prevailing conception of philosophical anthropology.

The most immediate influence this economic shift had on the practice of philosophy in the West was its cleaving of the majority of intellectual life from the Church. No longer was the Church (and by extension, the Universities, where students were considered wards of the Church) the originator and disseminator of ideas; rather, a young man with a philosophical disposition could turn to a secular patron in order to support his ideas and establish himself amongst the intellectual elite.⁶⁷

Of course, being outside of the Church's patronage (that is, outside of the Church's pocket) meant that one was, to some degree, outside of the reach of the Church's censorship. In centuries past, philosophers like Meister Eckhart, and even St. Thomas Aquinas, had been threatened with charges of heresy for their positions; as both men were monastics, and thus dependent on the Roman Catholic Church for their livelihood, such threats were taken quite seriously. Philosophers in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, though still subject to social censure, were free to make claims that were out of line with Christian orthodoxy, and in many cases, practical reasonableness without the threat of direct punishment.

René Descartes was born into this changing world, as the Renaissance in France began to peter out and before the Enlightenment period. It has been suggested by some, quite plausibly, that Descartes himself was the chief agent responsible for the emergence of the Enlightenment; the timeline of his life does nothing to diminish the validity of such a claim. After a varied early life in which he studied mathematics,

⁶⁷ Others, like Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, were direct beneficiaries of the changing financial situation as members of the aristocracy served as their own patrons.

physics, law and military science, Descartes experienced “visions” or dreams in 1619 that led him to begin the formulation of a new philosophical system.⁶⁸

The first decade or so of his philosophical career was mostly concerned with natural philosophy, particularly the study of physics. It was Descartes’ later forays into epistemology and philosophical anthropology, however, that have defined his legacy amongst philosophers and theologians. The famous *Discourse on the Method* lays bare the first principle of Descartes’ philosophy: “...no sooner had I embarked on this project [to reject all assumptions about truth] than I noticed that while I was trying in this way to think everything to be false it had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ was so firm and sure that not even the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics could shake it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.”⁶⁹ It should be noted that some philosophers have, in fact, rejected the validity of the *cogitio*,⁷⁰ as Descartes’ claim is known, insisting that the step from thought to existence requires at least one further premise.

Descartes’ philosophy, particularly as it relates to the mind and body, is further expounded in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. As with the *Discourse*, the *Meditations* represents a sharp departure from previous philosophy in the West, especially on how knowledge is acquired. Rather than agree with the Platonic notion of *anamnesis* (a remembrance or recalling to mind), Descartes argues that, “I remembered

⁶⁸ Hatfield, Gary. "René Descartes." Stanford University. Stanford University, 03 Dec. 2008. Web. 19 Apr. 2014

⁶⁹ Descartes, René. "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences." Early Modern Texts. N.p., 2007. Web. 5 Apr. 2014.

⁷⁰ Soren Kierkegaard notably includes such a criticism in his *Philosophical Fragments*.

that I had the use of my senses before I ever had the use of reason; and I saw that the ideas that I formed were, for the most part, made up of elements of sensory ideas. This convinced me that I had nothing at all in my intellect that I had not previously had in sensation.”⁷¹ This claim should make even the novice philosopher suspicious; how exactly does Descartes move from a sample of ideas (“the most part”) to a claim about *all of the ideas ever formed by human persons* with such surety?

Some scholars of Descartes might claim that the previous conclusion is a misreading of the *Meditations*, pointing out that Descartes identifies three sorts of ideas (innate, adventitious, factitious) in his Third Meditation.⁷² One’s conception of being a “self”, for example, could be thought of as an innate idea, as could the knowledge of God’s existence. Towards the end of that Meditation, Descartes writes of God, “The only remaining alternative is that my idea of God is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me. It is no surprise that God in creating me should have placed this idea in me, to serve as a mark of the craftsman stamped on his work.”⁷³ This, one might argue, is clear proof that Descartes has a distinction of ideas and that he accepts ideas can originate without sensory experiences.

Such an objection, however, fails to take into account the structure of the *Meditations*. The text is to be read as a work-in-progress; that is, the conclusions of the

⁷¹“Meditations on First Philosophy.” Early Modern Texts. N.p., 2007. Web. 5 Apr. 2014.

⁷² “Among my ideas, some seem to be innate, some to be caused from the outside, and others to have been invented by me. As I see it, my understanding of what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, derives purely from my own nature, which means that it is innate; my hearing a noise or seeing the sun or feeling the fire comes from things outside me; and sirens, hippogriffs and the like are my own invention. But perhaps really all my ideas are caused from the outside, or all are innate, or all are made up; for I still have not clearly perceived their true origin.”

Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

first day are to be considered less firm than those of the second day and so on.

Descartes entertains the concept of innate ideas on the third day, but his statement concerning sensory experience is in the Sixth Meditation. The original claim about the source of knowledge in Cartesian philosophy, then, seems validated because of its later place in the sequence. The subsequent arguments for God that Descartes makes in the *Meditations* also seem to support the notion that he sees all ideas as deriving from sense experience, as they are created in relation to his own finite nature. It seems appropriate, when considering the *Meditations* in their entirety, to conclude that Descartes is not declaring innate ideas to be real, but offers them up as a possibility to ultimately dismiss.

The main tenet of Descartes' anthropology is an ontological dualism. The person, in Descartes' system of thought, is a compound being made of "mind" and "body". The constituent parts of a person were not equally valuable, as Descartes makes clear in the *Meditations*, writing, "...my mind *is* me, for the following reason. I know that I exist and that nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing; from this it follows that my essence consists solely in my being a thinking thing, even though there may be a body that is very closely joined to me."⁷⁴ One may have a body, but a human person *is* a mind, according to Descartes.

The Cartesian contribution to philosophical anthropology can thus be summarized in this way: *A human person is a combination of mind and body, the latter of which is essential to human nature. All knowledge is ultimately derived via a bottom-*

⁷⁴ Ibid.

up process of sensory experience and rational reflection. The only conclusion which one can state with any certainty is that one exists; all else must be held as a “proximal” truth.

From the theological writers featured in this thesis up to this point, myriad objections could be raised to this account of the nature and capabilities of human persons. In many respects, Descartes’ sketch of human faculties is perhaps the most restricted or reduced account of personhood yet seen. The most apparent point of contention between Descartes and the traditional Christian seems to be the manner in which the self is known. For Descartes, true “self-knowledge” is the product of a rational exercise, of applying a stringent skepticism to one’s beliefs about the self until one reaches an undeniable principle, as displayed in his *Meditations*.

The theologians of the Christian tradition, on the other hand, seem to have a different view of the attainment of self-knowledge. St. Gregory of Nyssa explicitly stated that “...whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of time will barely apprehend what true Being is,” meaning that Reality could not be known outside of communion with the Divine, *even if* one engaged in protracted philosophical exercises. By virtue of omission, Descartes seems to deny the existence of the faculty of intellectus, the non-discursive faculty of knowing. Whereas the separate faculty of intellectus is denied or disputed in some authors prior to Descartes (as in the works of Eckhart, some would argue St. Augustine, etc.), it had hardly been denied during the Christian era that one could, nonetheless, know God.⁷⁵ As Descartes makes quite plain, the only thing one could be sure of within his system is one’s own existence, effectively denying that God could be *known*.

⁷⁵ Though the mechanism by which one would be able to know God without the faculty of intellectus itself poses a bit of a mystery.

Of course, it is possible that one might read Descartes in a different light. One might argue that the preceding argument is simply over-extended; Descartes' lack of discussion of the *nous* or *intellectus* is simply not the same as flatly denying its existence. He very well could have believed in its existence and simply refrained from examining it, or perhaps saw it as self-evident and therefore beyond the need to make explicit.

Such criticisms would, however, miss the entire point of Descartes' philosophy: in the *Meditations* he seeks to make *all assumptions* or beliefs explicit and thus open to philosophical examination. The fact that Descartes doesn't engage in the *Meditations* even once with a knowledge of God that is non-discursive suggests that he sees a concrete knowledge of God as outside of the realm of possibility. He's willing to suggest that God could be a deceiver (though he refutes it) and that God is not all-powerful (also refuted), but he's simply unable to fathom that one might *know* God. A contemporary of Descartes, Blaise Pascal, openly criticized the philosopher for his reduction of the role played by God, writing, "I cannot forgive Descartes; in all his philosophy he did his best to dispense with God. But he could not avoid making Him set the world in motion with a flip of His thumb; after that he had no more use for God."⁷⁶

The proofs of God offered by Descartes differ quite extensively from those produced by earlier Christians like St. Anselm; whereas the Archbishop of Canterbury derived his famous ontological argument during prayer and considered it a means for leading people to communion with God ("...[contemplation] casts aside cares, and excludes all thoughts save that of God, that it may seek Him. Man was created to see

⁷⁶ Pascal, Blaise. "The Pensees." *Pensees* by Blaise Pascal. Oregon State University, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2014.

God.”⁷⁷), Descartes’ “proofs” were the independent product of a rational mind for other rational minds.⁷⁸ Cartesian proofs for God’s existence have no “trajectory”; that is, they do not force one to act, but merely act as the presentation of a rational fact. The original claim, that Descartes’ silence on the intellect and knowledge of God seems to imply a lack of belief in either, thus seems validated. The fact that no explicit denunciation of the faculty of intellectus or general knowledge of God is present in the works of Descartes does not suggest he assented to them, but rather shows that the philosopher believed he had already removed the possibility of their existence from his system of thought.

⁷⁷ Anselm of Canterbury. "Internet History Sourcebooks." Internet History Sourcebooks. Proslogion, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2014.

⁷⁸ The proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas seem to be of the type produced by St. Anselm.

Section Seven: Descartes & Early Protestantism

It appears that René Descartes introduced an anthropology to Western audiences that departed significantly from early Christian thought on the capacities of the human person. It was previously stated that Descartes was born at a historical crossroads, between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It is now necessary to add a third component to that picture: the Protestant Reformation.

Descartes, born almost eighty years after the publishing of the *Disputatio Pro Declaratione Virtutis Indulgentiarum*, more commonly known as *The Ninety-Five Theses*, was a generation or two behind the major figures of the Reformation (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.). It is clear that the Reformation leaders before Descartes appear to have very little association with the kinds of ideas that Descartes would come to formulate. John Calvin (1509-1564), for example, wrote to the first topic that "...it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself,"⁷⁹ while to the second he claimed, "That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead..."⁸⁰ Though clearly not sharing Cartesian assumptions about human capacities, it remains unclear if Calvin believed in a non-discursive faculty by

⁷⁹ Calvin, John. "Institutes of the Christian Religion." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

which one might see God.⁸¹ Martin Luther (1483-1546), the man whom many regard as the father of the Protestant Reformation, certainly did not share Descartes' faith in the abilities of reason, as he is recorded in the the *Table Talk* to have said, "Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but—more frequently than not—struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God."⁸²

Neither Luther nor Calvin seem to have been mystics, but there were persons of a mystical disposition active in the early Reformation churches. Perhaps most famous amongst them was the Lutheran Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), who's *The Way To Christ* includes the following account of union with God: "When thou standest still from the thinking of self, and the willing of self; when both thy Intellect and Will are quiet and passive to the impressions of the Eternal Word and Spirit; when thy soul is winged up, and above that which is temporal with the outward senses and the imagination being locked up by Holy Abstraction; then the Eternal Hearing, Seeing, and Speaking will be revealed in thee; and so God heareth and seeth through thee, being now the organ of His Spirit; and so God speaketh in thee, and whispereth to thy spirit, and thy spirit heareth his Voice."⁸³

⁸¹ It is reasonable to consider Calvin a traditional Aristotelian in terms of his psychology; though he speaks of heart, intellect and soul, none of those terms seems to refer to a faculty capable of apprehending God. For further information, check out "The Unaccommodated Calvin : Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition" by Richard Mueller.

⁸² Mathesius, Johannes. "Table Talk." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁸³ Böhme, Jakob. "The Way to Christ." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

Böhme seems to be writing quite clearly about the use of the same faculty as described by St. Paul in his *Letter to the Corinthians* and St. Symeon the New Theologian in the *Discourses*, and though threatened by various authorities for his writing, he was never excommunicated or charged with heresy. It thus seems that the faculty of intellectus was present (if not widely accepted) in early Lutheranism. It was not only in Lutheranism that a faculty resembling the nous or intellect was spoken of; Lady Anne Conway (1631-1679), a contemporary of Descartes and a Quaker associated with the Cambridge Platonists, wrote in *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, "...those who are come unto a perfect Union with Christ, are mounted up into a Region or Sphere of perfect Tranquility, where nothing is seen or perceived to move or compel."⁸⁴

The non-discursive faculty, though not a central topic for the leaders of the early Reformation, has been shown to nonetheless be present in the works of their followers. It seems, then, that the churches of the Reformation were quite far from a Cartesian anthropology, in many cases explicitly opposing central tenets of his philosophy. Whether or not these positions continued to be held by the churches of the Reformation, however, remains to be seen.

⁸⁴ Conway, Anne. "Principles." *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy. A Celebration of Women Writers*, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

Section Eight: The Imposition of Cartesian Anthropology

The history of Christianity since the lifetime of René Descartes is, as a subject, terrifyingly complex; the sheer number of leaders, doctrines and controversies that emerged from that time period is enormous. Attempting to track the changing conceptions of human faculties through each of the major branches that make up Western Christianity would be a simply monstrous (and quite possibly maddening) undertaking. Instead of attempting to follow individual trends, a few major documents and councils of the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant bodies will serve as guideposts for belief, shedding light on widespread attitudes and assumptions about human personhood.

The first piece to be examined is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a foundational text for Reformed churches. The *Westminster Confession*, written during the lifetime of Descartes (1646), contains several sections regarding the faculties of the human person. Chapter VI, “Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and the Punishment Thereof”, addresses the sin of Adam and Eve, stating, “By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion, with God, and so became dead in sin, and *wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body*.”⁸⁵ The last section of that statement is immensely important for understanding Reformed or Calvinist opposition to a non-discursive faculty. Declaring all faculties to be “wholly defiled” serves as a *de facto* denial of the existence of the nous, as a non-discursive faculty, by definition, cannot be mistaken, fooled or turned askew. If the authors of the *Westminster*

⁸⁵ "Westminster Confession of Faith." Westminster Confession of Faith. Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

Confession were to affirm the existence of a nous or intellectus, it would create a contradiction in their theology.

In the eighth chapter of the *Westminster Confession*, however, it does seem that the possibility for seeing God is retained in the Reformed tradition. “Of Sanctification” begins with the following claim: “They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, *to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*”⁸⁶ Though the faculty which man uses to “see the Lord” is not named in the Westminster Confession, the fact that it is associated with “true holiness” is, perhaps, meant to indicate that the state differs from normal modes of perception.

Chapter XXVI, “Of the Communion of Saints”, offers one more clue as to the nature of man’s ability to commune with God, stating, “This communion which the saints have with Christ, does not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of His Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous.”⁸⁷ The promise made in 2 Peter 1:4 (“...ye might be partakers of the divine nature...”⁸⁸) seems to be in some tension with the first claim.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Second Epistle of Peter 1:4

The picture of human capacities that can be extracted from the *Westminster Confession* thus seems, at very least, to be more ambivalent than previous Christian statements regarding anthropology. The fourth chapter appears to exclude the faculty of intellectus from Reformed anthropology, but the prospect of seeing God mentioned in Chapter XIII perhaps leaves open the possibility of supra-rational perception. Though there are echoes of Descartes in the document (particularly in Chapter XXXII, which divides human persons strictly into bodies and souls), it cannot be said to be overtly Cartesian. Rather, an analysis of tenets within the *Westminster Confession* shows how Cartesian anthropology could appeal to a Protestant thinker.

Take, for instance, the apparent agreement between the Cartesian and Reformed traditions on the concept of self-knowledge, an accord formed by a convergence of thought rather than a common source. As the *Westminster Confession* clearly states, humans are said to be "...wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body."⁸⁹ All humans, however, have an inextricable experience of being a knowing subject, of being an "I", which cannot be escaped. The eyes can be closed, the other senses (to some extent) ignored, but the state of subjectivity is impossible to escape in waking life.⁹⁰ The Reformed tradition, in teaching that persons are "wholly defiled", would also have to conclude that the identification of oneself as "real" or "persisting" is quite possibly incorrect; after all, if all parts of the person are defective, the judgements those parts produce could very well be defective. It is nigh impossible to doubt the validity of one's experience of being a subject, however, as for the majority of the population, it

⁸⁹ "Westminster Confession of Faith." Westminster Confession of Faith. Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

⁹⁰ By "waking life", I mean to refer to the daily experience of the average person and as such I exclude the contemplative state, a state in which one does, in fact, escape subjectivity.

appears to coincide with all other experiences. For a Reformed thinker to function, then, the principle that one's experience of being a knowing subject has validity must be accepted. The legitimacy of all other tenets of the faith, even the notion that one is "wholly defiled", necessarily come *after* one has accepted the experience of being a subject as valid. A Reformed thinker can thus be sure of being a thinking being, but all other premises seem to be on shakier ground. One who has followed Reformed thinking on the notion of whole-defilement may thus end up in a state that seems to mirror a Cartesian skepticism, particularly the assertion that rationality is primary.⁹¹

This skepticism, as one might have guessed, may begin to provide an answer to one of the questions posed in the introduction. The skepticism of both Descartes and, apparently, the serious Reformed thinker, can lead one to acknowledge oneself as the ultimate arbiter of truth and falsehood. This conclusion, it would seem, could begin to explain a decline in recognition of Church authority, and ultimately, a decline in adherence. A feasible picture of how Cartesian anthropology *might* have been grafted into one branch of the Protestant tradition has thus been presented, but it requires further analysis and data in order to be proved or disproved. Before proceeding to that analysis, however, it is necessary to examine the councils that shaped modern thought in the other branch of Western Christianity, Roman Catholicism.

The First Vatican Council (1869-1870), convened over two hundred years after the writing of the *Westminster Confession*, dedicated a substantial amount of time to delineating the scope and magisteria of rationality. The Third Session of the Council

⁹¹ The predictable end of both Reformed thought (considering oneself "wholly defiled") and Cartesian thought is solipsism, though, in fairness to both traditions, the creation of any strong "conclusion" would seemingly go against the skeptical approach both systems encourage.

issued a decree that, while blaming the Protestant Reformation for championing a rationality opposed to tradition, admits that foreign elements have infiltrated the Church. A section of that decree lays bare the situation: "Thereupon there came into being and spread far and wide throughout the world that doctrine of rationalism or naturalism, utterly opposed to the Christian religion, since this is of supernatural origin, which spares no effort to bring it about that Christ, who alone is our lord and savior, is shut out from the minds of people and the moral life of nations. Thus they would establish what they call the rule of simple reason or nature... With this impiety spreading in every direction, it has come about, alas, *that many even among the children of the Catholic Church have strayed from the path of genuine piety, and as the truth was gradually diluted in them, their Catholic sensibility was weakened.* Led away by diverse and strange teachings and confusing nature and grace, human knowledge and divine faith, they are found to distort the genuine sense of the dogmas which holy mother church holds and teaches, and to endanger the integrity and genuineness of the faith."⁹² In admitting that perhaps even the attendees of the Council had had their Catholicism compromised by the philosophy of rationalism, the Council gives a picture of just how deeply Cartesian thought had permeated Western intellectual life. The First Vatican Council thus took as its mission the clarification of the Church's stance on doctrine, essentially a process of identifying elements that were contrary to the traditional teachings of the church. This process necessarily included a restatement of the place of humans in the universe and an elucidation of human faculties.

⁹²"Decrees of the First Vatican Council." Decrees of the First Vatican Council. Papal Encyclicals Online, n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.

It is somewhat startling, therefore, to find that the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* produced by the Third Session of that Council recognizes only two forms of knowledge. The fourth chapter of that text, “Faith and Reason”, divides knowledge into two categories, stating, “The perpetual agreement of the Catholic Church *has maintained and maintains this too*: that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards its source, but also as regards its object. With regard to the source, we know at the one level by natural reason, at the other level by divine faith.”⁹³ This claim appears patently false, even if one limits the scope to post-Schism authors in the West; surely Eckhart and Aquinas (in his private life) wrote of a sort of knowledge that qualified as neither faith nor reason.

One is tempted to assume that such a starkly reduced conception of human faculties is the product of a misinterpretation or translation error, but another chapter in the *Constitution* seems to affirm the two-fold division of human capacities. “On Revelation” begins with the following words: “The same holy mother church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, *can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason*: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. It was, however, pleasing to his wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and the eternal laws of his will to the human race by another, and that a supernatural, way.”⁹⁴ The supernatural revelation which the text speaks of is, of course, the Incarnation. “On Revelation” thus allows that one can know of God’s existence via

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

rational exercises and faith in the historical Incarnation of Christ, but the possibility of a non-discursive knowledge seems to again have been passed over. The First Vatican Council seems not only to have rejected the faculty of intellect, but even more provocatively, claimed that the Catholic Church had never acknowledged the validity of that knowledge. Though the Third Session of the Council affirmed that it was seeking to remove Cartesian rationalism⁹⁵ from Church doctrine, it seems that it instead affirmed its validity and place in the Church.

If the First Vatican Council can be thought of as removing the intellectus from doctrine, it could be argued that the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) removed the intellectus from method or practice. *Gaudium Et Spes*, also known as the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, one of the major documents produced by Vatican II, displays a rather bizarre back and forth description of human capacities. At some points, the text seems to return to the anthropology of the Church pre-Vatican I, only to pull back at the precipice of recognizing the intellectus.

The fifteenth section of *Gaudium Et Spes* is perhaps the best example of the uncomfortable meeting of antiquity and modernity, reading, “Man judges rightly by his intellect that he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences and in technology and the liberal arts. In our times he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself. Still he has always searched for more penetrating truths, and finds them. For his intelligence is not confined to observable data alone, but can with

⁹⁵ Thought not rationality as such.

genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened.”⁹⁶

The language of the document is more akin to an Enlightenment-era tome than any classical Christian text; man sharing “in the light of the divine mind” does not appear to mean anything more than man being capable of rational decision making. Though the Fall (retained as doctrine by the council, at least for the time being) has obscured man’s vision, the optimistic tone of the passage suggests that even that can be overcome.

One might object to this portrayal of the Council; surely *Gaudium Et Spes* isn’t *that* out of step with the rest of Church tradition? The tone and language might be “modernized”, but wasn’t that the point of the Council being called?

The fifth section of *Gaudium Et Spes* shows that the Second Vatican Council not only updated the language of church documents, but actually altered doctrine. In the Christian tradition, the value of persons has always been connected with the mindfulness of God (“...what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?”⁹⁷), as has the prospect of self-knowledge. Quite simply, true self-knowledge has been considered impossible outside of knowledge of God and vice versa. *Gaudium Et Spes* explicitly asserts to the contrary: “To a certain extent, the human intellect is also broadening its dominion over time: over the past by means of historical knowledge; over the future, by the art of projecting and by planning. *Advances in biology, psychology, and the social sciences not only bring men hope of improved self-knowledge*; in conjunction with technical methods, they are helping men exert direct

⁹⁶ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Gaudium Et Spes."Vatican Archives. Vatican: The Holy See, n.d. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

⁹⁷ Psalm 8:4

influence on the life of social groups.”⁹⁸ Whereas the first statement seemed to be a modern sentiment cloaked in traditional vocabulary, the second is thoroughly progressive in word and spirit. The sentiment expressed is, of course, a Cartesian one, one which is directly opposed by the full brunt of Church tradition.

The Second Vatican Council did not merely alter Church doctrine on anthropology and epistemology, but also instantiated these changes into its practices. The most prominent example of this is the introduction of *Novus Ordo* mass, the liturgy called for in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.⁹⁹ When viewed in conjunction with the anthropological devolution of that Council, the nature of the changes made to the mass seem to reflect a Cartesian anthropology: the change from Latin to the colloquial language indicates that a rational grasp of statements expressed in the liturgy is considered necessary, the posture and placement of the priest reflects rational dialogue rather than worship, etc. The source of these changes were understood by some of the more intellectual Catholics and received much criticism; it is said that the British writer J.R.R. Tolkien “...found the innovations too much for him. Disappointed by changes in the Mass's language and the informality of the ritual, he rose from his seat, made his way laboriously to the aisle, made three low bows and stomped out.”¹⁰⁰ As the statistical

⁹⁸ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Gaudium Et Spes."Vatican Archives. Vatican: The Holy See, n.d. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

⁹⁹ "The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as also the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved. For this purpose the rites are to be simplified, due care being taken to preserve their substance; elements which, with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage, are now to be discarded; other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the vigor which they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary."

"Sacrosanctum Concilium."Vatican Archives. Vatican: The Holy See, n.d. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Tribe, Shawn. "New Liturgical Movement: 35th Anniversary of J.R.R. Tolkien's Death: The Liturgical Thoughts of a Prominent Literary Catholic." Sacred Liturgy & Liturgical Arts, n.d. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

decline discussed in the introduction shows, it appears that many more since have followed Tolkien's example.

Section Nine: The Present and Future of the Christian West

Having conducted an analysis of Christian anthropology throughout history, it is now possible to judge the present condition of the Christian West by the standard of its former self. Western Christianity is not only going through a period of statistical decline and fragmentation (as the introduction showed), but is also experiencing a time of doctrinal deviation, and almost as troubling, moral confusion. Consider the following situation: while the Second Vatican Council seems to have shrouded some of its anthropological claims in (at best) ambiguous terms, *Gaudium Et Spes* very clearly exhorts its readers to respect “the dignity of the human person”. Chapter II of *Gaudium Et Spes* features a list of violations of that dignity, including “...any type of murder, genocide, abortion... all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed.”¹⁰¹ These sentiments are in keeping with Church tradition and, as such, elicit no great attention.

The largest body of Lutherans in the United States, however, apparently holds a different opinion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted a statement on abortion in 1991¹⁰² that includes the following lines: "This church recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy through induced abortion... What is determined to be a morally responsible decision in one situation may not be in

¹⁰¹ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Gaudium Et Spes."Vatican Archives. Vatican: The Holy See, n.d. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰² ""This social teaching statement was adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 28- September 4, 1991."

another."¹⁰³ As it is difficult to imagine Martin Luther condoning such a statement, one may conclude that the Church that bears his name has adopted a different model of faith.

The wild divergence between past and present is not confined to the ELCA; the Episcopal Church, mentioned to be in the midst of an internal lawsuit at the beginning of this thesis, declared in 1994 that "[n]o one shall be denied access to the selection process for ordination in this church because of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities or age..."¹⁰⁴ Though one might look upon the institution of a non-discrimination clause as admirable, the actual language is bordering on the absurd; surely the Episcopal Church is not prepared to ordain toddlers to the priesthood. Considering the dearth of characteristics that could disqualify one for ordination, it seems appropriate to question whether or not explicit religious belief will be required for ordination in the future.¹⁰⁵

From the perspective of a traditionalist Christian, things look rather bleak. All of the information gathered concerning anthropology throughout Christian history suggests that the conception of human faculties promoted by René Descartes has been grafted into the doctrine of Western Christian denominations. The faculty which was so pervasive in the early period of the Church, the intellectus, has apparently gone out of fashion. The consequence of this rejection is actually quite predictable; it seems likely that the pious souls remaining within Western denominations would revert to sub-

¹⁰³ "Theological Discernment." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Stances of Faiths on LGBT Issues: Episcopal Church I Resources." Human Rights Campaign. Stances of Faith, n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁵ After all, such a requirement seems inherently discriminatory.

rationality, for “...the states below reason and the states above it have, by their common contrast to the life we know, a certain superficial resemblance.”¹⁰⁶ The rise of the mega-church in America serves as evidence for such a claim, with their increasing power perhaps connected with the conflict between the desire for supra-rational knowledge and a Cartesian anthropology. One could also expect a portion of adherents to retain a belief in the ability of humans to know God but lose faith in the Christian religion, a sentiment which might explain the societal fascination with “Eastern” religions that began in the 1960’s.

Though the historical trail of documents suggests that Western Christian anthropology was greatly influenced by the work of René Descartes, it is actually the state of churches in the modern West that seems to confirm this. It could be expected that the imposition of Cartesian anthropology on a religious body would, ultimately, lead to the fragmentation of that group, for this reason: the Cartesian necessarily seems himself as the ultimate judge of the truth of a fact or circumstance.

The solipsistic emphasis of Descartes’ system makes all concepts, objects and persons *less real* than the knowing subject; frankly, if a person can only be fully convinced of their own (limited) existence, it seems likely that the aforementioned person would be more likely to be guided by their own council rather than that of another (potentially unreal) person. The number and increasing frequency of schisms in the Church since the time of Descartes seems to indicate that his philosophy has, in fact, permeated all levels of Western society.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, C. S. *That Hideous Strength; a Modern Fairy-tale for Grownups*. New York: Macmillan, 1968. Print.

As Descartes' conception of the human person removes the intellectus from the list of faculties, it would also be sensible to assume that a Cartesian anthropology would manifest itself by placing great emphasis on the rational and emotional realms and next to none on the noetic. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran body in North America, releases regular statements regarding the nature of gender identity and the like, but includes absolutely no information regarding the nature of spiritual practice in its "Theological Discernment Resources".¹⁰⁷ Likewise, the Episcopal Church does not include "encouraging the direct knowledge of God" or any analogous statement under its "Five Marks of Mission", but does state its dedication to "...transform[ing] unjust structures of society, to challenge[ing] violence of every kind and to pursu[ing] peace and reconciliation."¹⁰⁸

A defender of Western churches might allow that they are indeed declining in Western Europe and North America, but what, they might ask, is one to make of the growth of churches in Africa? A World Council of Churches Report from August of 2004 estimated that there would be over 600,000,000 Christians in Africa by 2025.¹⁰⁹ Surely this astounding growth is indicative of some sort of Western Christian revival?

One hoping to hear of a looming re-birth in the Christian West will, unfortunately, be disappointed by the reality of the situation. Sub-Saharan Africa, the area in which this supposed "boom" is occurring, has been alternately ignored and exploited by the peoples of Western Europe since its discovery; the story of Leopold II of Belgium offers

¹⁰⁷ "Theological Discernment." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁸ "The Five Marks of Mission." Episcopal Church. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2014.

¹⁰⁹ "World Council of Churches." World Council of Churches. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents>>.

a wonderful case-study. This process has resulted in very little Western-style education being available to the peoples living within that area. By virtue of having the entirety of the Western academic corpus withheld, it follows that the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa have largely avoided contact with the work of Rene Descartes and other rationalist philosophers.

The new Christians in that area are thus free from holding a Cartesian anthropology, but how “Christian” they actually are is debatable. The process of evangelization is, by-and-large, not being carried out by the traditional churches of the West, but by grass-roots efforts within the area. This can create a rather puzzling situation, as though “...a majority of Africans today regard themselves as ‘Christian,’ standard definitions are hard pressed to accommodate on-the-ground realities. Frequently, comfortably established old Christendom formulations and practices have been displaced by much that is unfamiliar and even shocking.”¹¹⁰ It is thus unlikely that this growing body of African Christians is knowledgeable of the traditional anthropology of the Christian faith, much less actively seeking to employ the faculty of intellectus.

There is, however, one branch of Christianity which does continue to speak of a non-discursive faculty, one which is actually growing in the United States. The caveat is this: it’s not the traditional church of the West. The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity reportedly grew by 16% in the United States during the period between 2000 and 2010, a rate that seems remarkable when compared to the statistics included in the introduction.¹¹¹ Its growth could be attributed to its being largely free of the central

¹¹⁰ "DACB Vision Article: Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent." Dictionary of African Christian Biography. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

¹¹¹ Chiles, Clay. "Report Finds Strong Growth In U.S. Orthodox Churches." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 06 Oct. 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

problems of the modern Christian West: as neither the Renaissance nor Enlightenment greatly impacted life in traditionally Orthodox lands, the anthropology held by the Eastern Church remains remarkably like that of the early church. Orthodoxy is, of course, beset by many problems, not the least of which are ethnophyletism and corruption; however, the relative dearth of socio-political problems makes the situation very attractive to the Western traditionalist.

The practice of contemplative prayer, of activating the non-discursive faculty and seeing the uncreated light of God, is not relegated to the status of “tower activity” in Orthodoxy, but is celebrated in the Church. St. Gregory Palamas’s defense of the practice of Hesychasm is the focal point of the second Sunday of Lent each year and is considered to be a continuation of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent. This arrangement makes a strong statement concerning the ability of man to see God; namely, that to deny it is heresy.

It seems, after a survey of theological and philosophical changes throughout the last two millennia, that the East is the only place left for the Christian of a classical disposition.¹¹² It can be somewhat disheartening to realize that Christendom has passed, that the old standard-bearer is dead, but the Western Christian must look at it as a necessary step in the history of man. Things of the earth were not built to last, but this truth should not be the cause of unexpected heartache; after all, Christ told his disciples in the *Gospel of John*, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good

¹¹² How much longer the East will retain its integrity is another matter entirely, though one well worth investigating.

cheer; I have overcome the world.”¹¹³ The noetic vision is still available, at least for a time, in the East; how long it will remain available is anyone’s guess.

¹¹³ Gospel of John 16:33